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ABSTRACT

This study of the home background of successful Asian-Americans found that specific aspects of home socialization can exert a positive effect on school adjustment and achievement. The study consisted of 90-minute structured interviews conducted with 15 Asian-American students (Harvard undergraduates or secondary school summer students--roughly equal numbers of Chinese, Japanese and Korean youth). Their families were found to motivate achievement by: (1) shaping very positive attitudes to learning; (2) underscoring the importance of the child's education by the parents' willingness to further that education by working harder to provide tutoring, moving into better school districts, etc.; (3) indicating high achievement expectations for the child and encouraging perseverance; (4) strictly controlling homework and recreational time; (5) providing accelerated exposure to the basic school curriculum prior to and outside of school; (5) encouraging children to deal with conflicts in a non-confrontational manner that encouraged self-control and increased concentration on academic work; and (6) excusing the child from daily household chores and economic contributions to the family unless doing so was essential. A de-emphasis on verbal activity was also found. The findings lend support to two theoretical trends in explanations of school achievement: the helplessness hypothesis and the home influence hypothesis. A list of references is included. (PS)

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Early Academic Socialization of

Successful Asian-American College Students[1]

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Running head: Asian academic socialization

Footnote

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The academic and occupational achievement of Asian immigrants to the U. S. has been much noted in recent years (eg. Bell, 1985). One striking manifestation of this success has been the percentage of Harvard students who are Asian, a figure currently approaching ten percent. In a comprehensive literature review, Vernon (1982) concludes that the most defensible explanation of Asian-American achievement centers on family structure and value systems. It therefore seems appropriate to study the home backgrounds of successful Asian-American students in an attempt to formulate testable hypotheses about the socialization of exemplary school achievement.

Roots of the Math Gap

One compelling reason to study the influence of Asian culture on educational development is the commonly observed tendency of Asians and Asian-Americans to do particularly well in mathematics learning. Stevenson et. al. (1985) have shown in careful crossnational comparisons that the children of Japan and Taiwan surpass American children in mathematics achievement as early as the first grade and leave American children even further behind by the fifth grade. There is ample documentation in Vernon (1982) and elsewhere that Asian-Americans excel in mathematics. This achievement profile is quite interesting in light of the aversion many American students develop to mathematical and technical subjects, an aversion so well-known that Americans have invented the expression "math anxiety" to describe it. If we could identify particular childrearing and/or pedagogical practices in Asian cultures which promote resistance to math anxiety, or actually create a preference for mathematical material, then the practical benefits for our technological society might be substantial.

There are several reasons to be optimistic about identifying such cultural

differences in socialization. First, research (Ginsburg and Russell, 1982; Song and Ginsburg, in press) has established that there are no major differences between black, white, and Asian preschoolers and kindergarteners with respect to informal mathematical competencies. Similarly, Stevenson et. al. (1985) find no evidence to support the notion that Asian schoolchildren have any basic advantage in cognitive aptitude that would explain their superior achievement scores.

If superiority in cognitive aptitude cannot explain Asian Americans' high levels of achievement, then it seems natural to examine the roles of motivation, attributions, and the like, all of which may be influenced by parental childrearing practices and values-- that is, by Asian American "academic socialization"

The informal positive evidence for such family-based academic socialization is fairly abundant (see Vernon, 1982 and Kitano, 1984). The role of attributional styles in achievement is becoming a central facet of such socialization studies. Stevenson et. al. (1985) and Holloway et. al (1986) show that Asian parents believe more strongly than Americans that effort, rather than fixed differences in ability, is the most important factor in accounting for learning outcomes. Asian parents are also more likely than Americans to be dissatisfied with their children's current performance. And Hess and his associates (Hess, et. al., 1986, Hess, et. al., unpublished) show that Japanese, mainland Chinese and Chinese-American children share their parents' bias in favor of effort attributions for educational achievement. However, except for the very last result mentioned, these cross-national comparisons are difficult to interpret because of the multiple, confounded differences between Asian and American educational systems. The experience of Asian-American children in American schools, on the other hand, seems like a natural laboratory in which to isolate the role family socialization differences play in the adaptation of students to the equated context of American schooling. The

case studies below of successful Asian-American college students raise issues that can be pursued in direct studies of school age children.

The Study

We conducted 90 minute structured interviews with fifteen Asian-American students. These were either Harvard undergraduates or secondary school summer students; they volunteered and were paid six dollars. The sample contained roughly equal numbers of Chinese, Japanese and Korean youth. All were children of immigrants, but some were born in the U.S. and others were not. With two exceptions, the parents' schooling level in Asia and their occupational level here were both relatively high; a number of parents came here on scholarship. It will obviously be essential for future research to analyze the influence of class on Asian-American socialization and distinguish various waves of immigration. Nevertheless, the tendency of subjects to report how widespread were their experiences in the Asian community, and the considerable proportion of families with multiple high achievers, make it plausible that ethnic cultural socialization per se was being studied.

The interviews began with an open-ended request for salient autobiographical memories about learning and then continued with approximately thirty questions covering a range of issues. These included assessments of parental instructional styles, parental attitudes and practices in child rearing, family involvement in the child's perception of school demands in the early years and, finally, self-assessment of the subject's current responses to academic challenges. A table of potentially significant persons, settings and subject matters associated with learning was provided to cue episodic retrieval.

Results

While the families showed much individuality, our analysis-- essentially an informal induction of common experiences-- suggests that it is possible to abstract prototypical tendencies in child rearing. By distinguishing factors which seem variable from those which characterize the upbringing of a large percentage (and occasionally all) of the sample, we hope to generate new hypotheses but of course do not offer definitive conclusions.

Cognitive Scaffolding vs. *Academic Socialization*

The first question the interview protocols can address is whether parental influence always depends on the kind of sensitive tutoring interaction or "scaffolding" described by neo-Vygotskians (Rogoff, 1985), or whether the only indispensable parental influence is a more general valuation of learning and shaping of attitudes relevant to learning. In our sample, the latter seems more likely given the variability in tutoring style which we observed along three dimensions. First, parents varied in the extent to which they had the time and/or skill to tutor. Second, the sample was divided on whether they considered a parent a patient tutor or rather an impatient and undesirable one. And third, a tendency identified by Hatano (unpublished) for Asian parents to emphasize rote efficiency over insight or creativity in learning is inconsistently represented in these reports. Some parents never wanted their children to ask "Why?", yet others emphasized creativity deliberately-- for example, by covering walls with writing paper. Kitano (1984) reviews research on mother-preschooler interaction which also finds some diversity in Asian-American tutoring styles. While more research should certainly be done, researchers should be open to the possibility that the detailed microstructure of parent-child cognitive interaction is not crucial to

academic socialization (which is not to say that it is unimportant for curriculum design, computer-aided instruction, etc.)

Committment to Education

The more uniform factor noted in the home environments was what might be called a "synergy" between close family feelings and parentally instilled respect for education. Often guilt about parental sacrifice seemed to be the socializing instrument which transmits educational achievement striving from parent to child. The most direct index of the strong family structure is the absence of a single divorce in the whole sample. Two other curious things can be taken as indirect indices: First, these Asian-American parents tend not to use babysitters and, secondly, they often do not give their children freely spendable allowances. Both choices seem to reflect a desire to play a direct oversight role in their children's activities. Also, parents would often have the children present at gatherings. However, we failed to find any evidence that they tried to involve children in adult conversation to stimulate cognitive advances.

The emphasis on educational study as the principal obligation of the child was equally pervasive. It seemed to represent a mixture of desire for economic advancement, traditional reverence for scholars, and some degree of threat that mediocrity would lead to dire economic insecurity. The extent to which some subjects' entire community would harp on the importance of getting into a good college could be comical. Yet, contrary to some stereotypes, parents were not uniformly negative about sports in this sample. The important thing is that academics always had to take priority.

The reciprocity of parents showing love by providing the best possible opportunities for learning and children returning love by doing their best in school

was quite rich and explicit. The children were told that any investment in tutors, books, music lessons, summer schools, etc. was worthwhile, and they often could clearly denominate these things in terms of stretched budgets and long parental working hours. At the furthest extreme was the prevalence of family moves to relocate into better school systems. Indeed, many cited enhanced educational opportunities as the reason parents emigrated to the U.S. in the first place. Some parents who cannot leave the homeland even send children over with caretakers. Finally, an interesting comment made by one Harvard student suggested that mothers in Boston's Chinatown often cite the need to help their children with learning as one reason to withdraw from the labor force if the family can afford it. Kitano (1984) likewise mentions that a sample of Chinese-American mothers considered formal teaching of preschoolers a more important part of the maternal role than did other mothers and the former requested notification of kindergarten learning problems more commonly than did the latter. Clearly, there are a great variety of ways that parents can underscore the importance of the child's education and parental willingness to further it.

An Effortful Excellence

Even though education was highly valued, the motivational regimen that worked so well for these subjects was based not on large extrinsic rewards, but on high expectancies and socialization of effortful perseverance. Parents held uniformly high expectations for achievement: Good rather than excellent, A- rather than A and so on were often greeted with a nonpunitive but insistent demand that the child had the ability to do better. If a child eventually proved to have no talent for, say, the piano, the parents might allow the activity to lapse. But it was clear that most of our Asian-American subjects had internalized the same bias toward effort attributions Hess et. al. (1986) identified in Japan and Stevenson et. al. found in both Japan and Taiwan

(1985). And this belief that "There's nothing you can't handle if you try hard enough" was put in the service of parental expectations.

At the same time, the great majority received only muted, sparing praise, and only a few ever received material rewards for good grades. An alternate, and apparently pervasive, motivating technique was nonridiculing comparison of the child's performance with exemplary models. One manifestation of this is that the ethnic newspapers seem to devote much more space to stories about high achieving students than would seem usual. And parents frequently point these stories out to their children. Secondly, the child was often told how other parents' children were doing academically. This seems simultaneously to provide role models and competitive stimulation.

Activity Supervision

The major factor which may actualize the achievement potential of the preceding motivational pattern is the strict control of after-school time most parents exerted. This control could vary from simply making sure homework was done to permitting no more than one afternoon a week to play with friends. Even if a child just came back to the parents' grocery store after school, the point is that he or she was watched over in the grocery. Many parents assisted with homework difficulties, while those less prepared to do so because of linguistic or educational deficits certainly inquired about the child's progress. In some cases sibling tutoring supplemented the parental contribution.

The theme of control of after-school time was well elaborated. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on scheduling library trips, music lessons, etc. On the other hand, there was a slight tendency to discourage unlimited play and a strong tendency to

regulate both the quantity and quality of television viewing. A related, and possibly more troubling, phenomenon are the reports from a couple of subjects that they had few friends in grade school and that this led them to engage in solitary learning. Some parents seemed to actually abet this isolation, for instance by discouraging the child from inviting anyone home.

The typical parental reaction to a school difficulty tended to be an exaggeration of, and hence a good summary for, the tripartite pattern we have presented up to this point. They 1) provided additional remedial resources such as workbooks and tutoring drill, 2) elicited greater effort and 3) constrained outside activities. Perhaps none of this is very surprising, but what may prove to be unusual is the consistency of parental concern.

Cognitive Enrichment

One reason school problems might not arise in the first place, though, was the prevalence of accelerated exposure to the basic school curriculum. Prior to and outside of school, many parents taught their children basic mathemathics through diverse activities such as counting pennies, memorizing the Chinese multiplication table, or solving geometry problems in the car. For some children, there was strong emphasis on overlearning critical lessons so that they would not have to be learned more than once. In reading, where parents' language handicaps were often a factor, some ingenious learning strategies were devised, including having a young child define words for a Chinese grandmother, copying English text, explaining text to a mother, and doing weekly composition assignments outside school.

An equally surprising departure from the norm was the several instances where

the child attended summer school for acceleration— mostly early in high school but in one case in grade school as well. Combining this practice with the tendency to schedule learning time after the school day leads one to observe a possible parallel between the mandated longer school year and longer school day in some Asian countries (see Stevenson et. al., 1985) and the apparent de facto duplication of these requirements for some of our subjects.

Adaptive Classroom Attitudes

This accelerated passage through the private world of cognitive skill was facilitated by several loosely related attitudes that helped define the relation of the child to the external society. First, while some students sensed that their minority status required them to do better than average to obtain the same rewards, this was not pervasive. It is more important to observe the relative absence of feelings that the school threatened the student's cultural identity. This kind of threat is a major problem for American blacks, according to the anthropologist Ogbu (1983).

Secondly, upon reaching school age the child must accommodate to a new socializing agent, the teacher. And the uniform report of our sample is that a relatively unquestioning respect for teachers was inculcated at home. This was true even in cases where direct parent involvement in school was minimal because of language problems. One subject remarked that the disorders in her American classroom were a vivid contrast to the quiet discipline of her Saturday Japanese language class. Another subject said her mother insisted she take small gifts to the teacher. And a third even reported that when once she swore at her mother, the response was, "I hope you don't talk that way to your teacher."

A third possible form of attitude socialization that promotes school adjustment is the reported strong discouragement Asian children receive about fighting. Some children were instructed to deal with harassment by ignoring it and inducing the other person to lose interest. It is well known that some non-Western cultures put a greater emphasis on self-control of aggression than we do (see, for example, Lebra, 1976). It may be significant that a bias toward non-confrontational responses seemed to co-occur with high respect for learning among Jews immigrating from Europe as well. Just as the economist Thomas Sowell has observed that both Asian-Americans and American Jews shunned political conflict in favor of entrepreneurial activity (Sowell,1981), one might conjecture that in the microcosm of school society the child is urged to do about the same-- ie., to avoid conflicts that reduce concentration on academic work.

Prioritizing Education

A final way in which many Asian parents shaped the child's intercourse with the external world was the absence of any pressure to contribute to either daily household chores or economic livelihood unless doing so was essential. As one subject put it, "Studying could get you out of 99 percent of anything." Clearly, by not demanding such contributions, the parents simultaneously made more study time available, provided an incentive to study, and increased the sense of obligation to the parent. A striking extension of this behavior is the many cases where parents discouraged any part-time work in high school and college- even to the point of absorbing the cost of that part of college financial aid involving a job. The same underlying concern for uninterrupted studies underlies resistance some parents have to the increasingly common idea that a few years of work should intervene between college and graduate school. The effect of these influences may be crucially to alter the students' perception of how to manage time in pursuit of educational goals.

Low Verbal Interaction

There was also a rather unexpected discovery when a question was asked about the kind of conversational topics the family tended to discuss. This query led to several statements that the family was very quiet and did not talk much at all around the dinner table or elsewhere. If one combines this unexplained observation of low verbal activity in any language with the deemphasizing of social skills, one sees how the low representation of Asian-Americans in, say, law, compared to science and medicine, might be a byproduct of socialization. In an article critical of the "model minority myth", Suzuki (1980) argues that lower verbal skills and general taciturnity in Asian-Americans is partially a defensive reaction to racial ostracism. But if a deemphasis on verbal expression is present in family interaction from an early age, the socialization factor is likely to be more critical. Certainly, there is a strong emphasis on non-verbal communication in Japanese culture (Lebra,1976).

Seeing As Others See Us

At the end of the interview, the students were asked to speculate about how they might have been different had they grown up in a white majority family. In many respects they see majority upbringing as the inverse of their own. That is, they believed they would have had parents who gave them more freedom, but possibly cared less about their welfare, and that they would have had a less positive image of academic achievement and less willingness to work hard, but more developed social skills. Yet the difference between the experience of Asian-Americans and the rest of us should not be exaggerated because they reported many of the same concerns about laziness, procrastination, daydreaming, study anxiety and cramming that everyone has felt.

Theoretical Discussion

We believe that our inquiry lends support to two recent theoretical trends in explanations of school achievement. The first of these is the use of the concept of learned helplessness to account for long term motivational problems of students (Dweck, 1984; Kuhl, 1985). The second is the increasing conviction that specific aspects of home socialization can exert a positive effect on school adjustment irrespective of class or race (White, 1982; Entwisle and Hayduk, 1982). Future studies of Asian-American school achievement may be an ideal way of examining the validity of these theoretical positions in ecologically valid settings.

The Helplessness Hypothesis

Learned helplessness is a psychological state in which repeated failure to control the outcome of one situation induces a carryover of passivity and a depressed level of performance to a new situation. Carol Dweck (eg. Dweck, 1984) has shown that children differ in the readiness with which they succumb to helplessness on experimental learning tasks. A prominent explanation of the cause of learned helplessness is an attributional bias to explain failure as due to global, stable and uncontrollable causes (Fincham and Cain, in press). In particular, Dweck finds that a bias to attribute inequality in academic performance to differences in relatively fixed abilities, instead of to the variable and controllable factor of effort, is a good predictor of susceptibility to helplessness after learning failure (Diener and Dweck, 1978; Dweck, 1984).

In Germany, Kuhl (eg., 1985) has shown parallel results indicating that a self-reported tendency to perseverate on thoughts of previous failure experience is an

equally strong predictor of experimentally-induced helplessness. The research programs of Kuhl and Dweck seem to dovetail neatly: At the same time that Dweck has found that the helplessness prone children, classified by ability bias in attribution, exhibit task-irrelevant, self-conscious and pessimistic cognitions during post-failure problem solving, Kuhl has shown that performance deterioration can be blocked if irrelevant failure cognitions are experimentally suppressed or if the sting of prior failure is explained away well in advance. Kuhl (1985) has convincingly argued that it is not an expectation of the likelihood of renewed failure which explains learned helplessness, but rather the inability to screen out interfering cognitions which prevent initially hopeful expectations from being realized.

The hypothesis we put forward is that some of the socialization patterns identified in this paper could be associated with an acquired resistance to academic learned helplessness. If the conditions which induce helplessness are more often found in mathematical and technical areas of instruction, where the helpless state has been labeled "math anxiety", the anomaly of more widespread comfort with these subject matters among Asian-Americans would naturally follow. Dweck (1984) has given several possible reasons why learned helplessness may be more common in mathematics. And it does seem natural that some of the socialization themes we have identified-- high value of learning conveyed through mutual sacrifices, high expectations with muted praise, salience of peer models, and inculcation of an effort bias in attributions for academic outcomes-- would create the "mastery orientation" (Dweck, 1984) or "action orientation" (Kuhl, 1985) which are hypothesized personality mediators of resistence to helplessness. Our future research will try to authenticate this causal chain beyond the simple demonstration of Asian differences in attributions shown by Hess and Stevenson (Stevenson, et. al., 1985; Hess, et. al., 1986).

The Answer's at Home

One of our informants said he came to feel that, even if teaching in school is sometimes awful, " the answer's at home someplace." The factors reviewed in relation to helplessness, coupled with the other factors we have identified including time supervision, enrichment, socialization of respect for teachers, avoidance of conflict and deemphasis of nonacademic responsibilities, form a strong constellation of hypotheses which situate part of the "answer" to early school achievement at home.

Moreover, our findings are consistent with an identifiable trend back to optimism about home influences on cognitive development. Karl White, in a scrupulous meta-analysis of studies claiming a relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement (White, 1982), has emerged with two major findings. First, the magnitude of the correlation between achievement and family SES as traditionally defined-- through income, education and/or occupation of parents-- and achievement depends crucially on the unit of analysis. If, as is often done, the mean SES and achievement of schools is used to compute a correlation, it is .73. But if it is more appropriately calculated student by student, it is only .22. Secondly, if studies which misleadingly defined characteristics of home environment as SES are eliminated from consideration, the correlation of family home atmosphere with individual student achievement is .33. The five most frequent variables used to operationalize home atmosphere were family's attitude toward education, reading materials in the home, family stability, aspirations of parents for the child and amount of cultural activities in which the family participates.

Additional support for the influence of home rearing conditions on school achievement comes from a path analysis of early school achievement by Entwisle and

Hayduk (1982). After analyzing relationships between parent expectancies, child expectancies and obtained marks in reading and math, from first through third grades, they conclude, "With IQ controlled, children of parents with high expectations do better than children of parents with low expectations, and this is not a consequence of parent expectation acting upon child expectation. · · · It seems likely that parents promote specific achievement-related activities rather than just provide an overall positive atmosphere."

A controlled comparison of ethnic differences in socialization, particularly with close attention to varying outcomes among subgroups or atypical individuals, may be a tool for doing the difficult job of examining the causal status of these home atmosphere variables. Naturally, one should be alert to the possible negative side of any particular socialization practice. For example, one informant believed that there is a subgroup of Asian-American students that becomes alienated from the motivational patterns described and exhibit poor educational performance. The issue of whether creativity is sufficiently encouraged in these rearing environments is also commonly raised. Nevertheless, the basic fact of high Asian and Asian-American mathematics achievement, based on normal curriculum materials, leads one to ask whether all our research eggs should be put in the basket of instructional cognitive science. There may be motive and cognitive style influences at home which will appreciably moderate how much our best instructional strategies will matter.

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